DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 420 CS 504 348

AUTHOR Streff, Craig R.
TITLE The Interpersonal Communication Unit in the Secondary Speech Course: A Personal View.
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Communication Association.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Journal of the Wisconsin Communication Association; v13 p36-42 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Content; *Educational Philosophy; *Interpersonal Communication; Secondary Education; Speech Communication; *Speech Instruction

ABSTRACT

Weaver Award winning speech communication instructor Craig Streff believes the most important goals of his interpersonal communication instruction are a strong cognitive and affective base, without which practical interpersonal skills are not likely to be developed. Given this overview, what he considers to be the most significant points of the interpersonal unit of his speech communication fundamentals course include the following: (1) interpersonal communication is directly related to intrapersonal, public, and mass communication; (2) all interpersonal communication entails risk; (3) the ability to decenter cognitively and emotionally is learned through, and developed by, responsible interpersonal communication; (4) ethical and moral responsibilities are inherent in interpersonal communication; (5) effective interpersonal communication concepts and skills are particularly important within the family structure; (6) interpersonal communication is at once both an integrating and an individualizing process; (7) interpersonal communication, especially through speech communication, fulfills psychological needs; (8) interpersonal communication can both cause and resolve conflict; (9) interpersonally, communication can generally be classified into two modalities--"I-It" and "I-Thou"; and (10) effective interpersonal communication involves a wide repertoire of transmitters, channels, media, and skills. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED233420

THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION UNIT IN THE SECONDARY SPEECH COURSE: A PERSONAL VIEW

Craig R. Streff

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Craig R. Streff

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 248

THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION UNIT IN THE SECONDARY SPEECH COURSE: A PERSONAL VIEW

Craig R. Streff

Craig Streff, Weaver Award winner in 1973, has contributed to WCA as president and Journal editor. Craig received both his B.A. (1965) and his M.S. (1967) from U.W.M. His entire teaching experience, eighteen years, has been at Wauwatosa East High School. Besides being a very active communication professional, having published about fifteen articles in professional journals, Craig has also chaired the Wauwatosa Youth Commission four times between 1972-1982. He received the Distinguished Service Award in Wauwatosa in 1974 and was selected to the U.W.M. Athletic Hall of Fame in 1976.

Overview

Lee Thayer has observed that like breathing and loving, all those significant things which people come to "do naturally," we come to take them for granted.[1] If there is one thing that human beings come to "do naturally" by virtue of our birthright as human beings, it is spoken symbolic interaction. Moreover, if there is one level of communication about which our students think they need little to learn, it is interpersonal communication. Despite all the evidence that we and our students know to the contrary from personal experience, i.e., that we don't listen well, that we do not communicate well within the family structure, that we fail to empathize, that we fail to compliment, that we fail properly to handle or recognize feedback, that we have wide gaps among individuals of different races, genders, generations, occupations, and religions, that we all have fewer friends than we would like because we don't know how to initiate and maintain relationships, and that all of these failings represent significant voids in our personal lives, both we and our students have a tendency to underestimate the value of studying interpersonal communication.

Given such underestimation, the most important goals in my teaching of interpersonal communication are cognitive and affective. Without a strong cognitive and affective base, practical interpersonal skills are not likely to be developed. I want my students to understand and appreciate the dignity of the human condition. I want them to understand and appreciate the significance of the process by which they relate. I want them to understand that their knowledge, appreciation, and skills involving interpersonal communication are central to their ability to maximize their opportunities for desirable relationships. I want them to appreciate the study of interpersonal communication as among the most important and useful of their academic studies. I want them to understand and appreciate concepts such as decentering, empathy, risk, trust, disclosure, Buber's "I-It" and "I-Thou" modalities, Rogers' notion of "becoming" through healthy

interaction, and Kaplan's distinctions between "dialogue" and "duologue" as simply indispensable to them as maturing, responsible, social persons. Moreover, I believe that if students do understand and appreciate these concepts, the practical application of skills associated with them will be facilitated in their daily lives. Consequently, I concentrate on these concepts and because of time constraints, seldom play games, simulate experiences, or plan "exercises." I often lecture, discuss, and read articles and sections of essays aloud to/with my classes. I have found that such traditional methods are effective and efficient for me, but do not wish to suggest methodology in this essay. I wish only to present the philosophy which informs my selection of "content" and it identify some of the specific "key learnings" which comprise it.

Key Learnings

Given this overview, the "content" of what I consider to be the most significant learnings in the interpersonal unit of my Speech Communication Fundamentals course are described as follows.

(1) Interpersonal communication is directly related to intrapersonal communication. The manner in which one related to others is highly influenced by the manner in which he relates to himself. There is ample opportunity here to examine how one's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs affect the massages he sends, how he perceives and responds to the messages he recieves, and how his values and other highly individualized characteristics affect--and are affected by--his interpersonal communication.

(2) Interpersonal communication is directly related to public and mass communication. Since the individual is the basic unit of communication, and since meanings, perceptions, information, and feedback are all individually oriented, all communication is essentially one to one. It is important for students to understand and appreciate the significance of individualization of interpersonal communication experience across the spectrum of all four levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, public, and mass).

(3) The self comes to be in every dialogue. This statement, taken verbatim from Abraham Kaplan's "The Life of Dialogue,"[2] emphasizes the concept of actualiziation through association. In the reading of this essay with my students, I emphasize the importance of the concept of becoming a self, discovering one's identity, through truly genuine communication with a responding other. I label as a "first principle of communication" the notion that since words are more than mere agents of communication, that they are, as Cooke says, "bearers of the person,"[3] each of us has the responsibility to "give himself" to others through his words. The concepts of "becoming" and "self-giving" are among the most important in this unit.

(4) All interpersonal communication entails risk. Notions of risk, trust, spontaneity, and authentication are all of great significance to the study of interpersonal communication. I find that students have no difficulty understanding and appreciating them, especially in combination with other

key learnings.

(5) The ability to decenter cognitively is learned through and developed by responsible interpersonal communication. Cognitive decentering refers to the ability to understand how another thinks from his point of view. Barnlund argues that almost all meaningful communication is designed to confront differences, and that it is precisely this feature of interpersonal communication which provides individuals with the opportunity to consider ideas and perceptions outside the realm of their own experiences.[4] Since, as he notes, "The world men get inside their heads is the only world they know," unless they are kept open to differences in perception and experience of others, they are likely to become imprisoned within the constraints of their own invention.[5] Interpersonal communication is each person's primary means for change, growth, and self-actualiziation. Decentering is essential to the development of all aspects of social and cognitive maturity, and consequently is a concept students should understand and appreciate. Role-playing exercises and consideration of how and why people of various races, generations, cultures, gender, and status think the way they do facilitate the learning of this important concept.

(6) The ability to decenter emotionally is learned through and developed by responsible interpersonal communication. Emotional decentering (empathy) is likewise fundamental to effective human relationships, for it is equally important to be able to "feel" as another does as it is to "think" as he does. In this respect, I emphasize empathic listening in relation to this concept, distinguishing between confirming and disconfirming responses and introduce students to probing, supporting, evaluating, understanding and interpreting responses.

(7) Ethical and moral responsibilities are inherent in interpersonal communication. Several years ago Waldo Braden renewed the Aristotelian notion of ethics quite well, saying: "We must be more than teachers of how-to-do-it. We must be teachers of attitudes and ethics."[6] In teaching our students aspects of interpersonal communication, Frank Dance is even more emphatic: "Spoken language is not amoral. Spoken language has an immanent morality, an immanent social ethic. (It) entails a moral imperative."[7] I would have my students believe strongly that lying, deception, backbiting, rumor, gossip, manipulation, and profanity are all inherently unethical and immoral abuses of the birthright of speech communication which is central to our functioning as human beings. I want students to take seriously their responsiblities regarding the ethical and moral use of symbols. Moreover, I have found at the end of the semester when I invite students to comment on the course in any way they wish that many students find this concept to have been among the most significant learnings in the course.

(8) Effective interpersonal communication concepts and skills are particularly important within the family structure. In 1980, the Wauwatosa Youth Commission compiled a report entitled "The Needs and Concerns of Youth and Families in Wauwatosa."[8] It cited over 225 findings and recommendations in twelve sections, the first and foremost of which was "Communication." It

contained many specific findings and recommendations which emphasized the importance of good communication patterns in the home. Therein it identified specific responsibilities of both youth and parents to enhance interpersonal communication patterns. As a member of the Commission, I was involved in the formulation and distribution of the report, and I had it reproduced by our system's central A-V department. I distribute a copy to each of my students and require that the entire report be read. In the interpersonal unit we read and discuss each of the findings and recommendations related to family communication situations. As an adjunct assignment, I invite my students to select one finding or recommendation as the basis of a four-minute speech to inform or persuade in the public speaking unit. Although the topic selected is not restricted to the section on communication, many students return to this section and deliver interesting and provocative speeches on topics related to youth and family communication. If readers are interested, I can make copies of the report available upon request.

(9) Interpersonal communication is at once both an integrating and individualizing process. Whenever we communicate with another, we are both joined with and separated from him. Interpersonal communication links us to others and at the same time enables us to discover how we differ from others. We find our unique characteristics by consciously and unconsciously realizing how we differ from others. This notion is made particularly clear in Kaplan's "The Life of Dialogue" wherein he works with Martin Buber's thoughts regarding interpersonal relationships and observes "Through the Thou a man becomes an I."[9]

(10) Interpersonal communication, especially through speech communication, fulfills psychological needs. Interpersonal communication is not an end in itself. As with all forms of behavior, it is a means to an end. I encourage my students to ask the question "Why?" whenever analyzing a communicative espisode. "Why did he say that"? "Why did she respond the way she did"? I begin with the premise that all behavior is a form of behavior. I introduce my students to Schutz's "interpersonal" needs (inclusion, affection, and control)[10] and Robert Ardrey's "psychological" needs (identity, stimulation, and security).[11] Students tend to discover with genuine interest and enthusiasm just how powerful and constant these needs are, and how important interpersonal communication is to their satisfaction.

(11) Interpersonal communication can cause and resolve conflict. It is often assumed that if people would only talk things out, they would be able to resolve their differences. Often that may be true, but not always. Talking with other people is also a way of not only exploring but also exacerbating differences, and this can lead to greater conflict than was originally realized. There is nothing magical about speech communication, interpersonal communication. It can cause conflict; it can resolve conflict and there are some situations that simply can not be settled merely by talking. Communication should not be seen as either the cause of or the solution to all problems.

(12) Interpersonally, communication can generally be classified into two

modalities: "I-It" and "I-Thou." The philosopher Martin Buber coined these terms to describe two basic approaches to interpersonal relationships. "I-It" communication is the kind in which ones sees himself as deserving of respect and dignity as a human being but looks upon the other as something less than a fully human person. Dehumanization, depersonalization, then, are characteristics of "I-It" communication. "I-Thou" communication is the kind in which one relates to the other with an attitude of respect for the humanness of both self and other. "I-Thou" relationships therefore enhance the personality and self-esteem of both persons. "I-It" relationships not only involve dehumanization of the other but also the dehumanization of oneself as well. These elementary thoughts are discussed in much greater detail and sophistication by Buber in many of his writings, foremost of which is his classic I and Thou.[12] Kaplan's application of them to several interpersonal contexts in "The Life of Dialogue" make it an excellent resource for teachers and students. Moreover, when I was editor of the WCA Journal in 1973 and published Kaplan's off-cited essay, I felt so strongly that its potential as a resource for the teacher of interpersonal communication should be maximized that I commissioned Professors Kyes and Moe of UW-Stevens Point to write a follow-up essay which elaborated on its application to the teaching of interpersonal communication. Their essay, "Some Muddy Reflections on Abraham Kaplan's 'The Life of Dialogue,'"[13] will prove stimulating to any teacher who wishes to investigate how Buber's and Kaplan's application to these modalities might enhance his teaching of this unit.

One of the most meaningful assignments in this unit is a short paper in which I ask students to identify two specific interpersonal situation/relationships in their lives which tend to be of the "I-It" modality. I ask them to consider what might be done to convert the situation/relationship into an "I-Thou" modality. We then read some of the papers aloud and discuss them.

(13) Effective interpersonal communication involves a wide repertoire of transmitters, channels, media, and skills. Any signal which is received by another has some sort of impact. Interpersonally communicated signals are not restricted to the spoken and written word. Interpersonal communication may be accomplished through the use of the traditional three forms of nonverbal communication (proxemics, kinesics, and paralanguage) as well as by our use of time, color, in short almost anything. I do not believe it is necessary to exhaust the list of variables, either in this essay or in the classroom. I simply want my students to understand that any signal from any source-whether it is received by the sense of sight, hearing, taste, smell, or touch-is capable of eliciting a response. I want them to become more environmentally aware or their communication, more perceptive as to its variables, and more sensitive to its potential effect. I want to synthesize rather than analyze nonverbal communication, hoping to facilitate their understanding, appreciation, and skillful use of the totality of their communicative potential.

(14) Effective communication of specific interpersonal messages requires the application of many of the aforementioned concepts and principles.

In an attempt to apply communication concepts and principles to concrete interpersonal situations, I assign each student a topic which constitutes a specific interpersonal message, i.e., a promise, a compliment, an apology, a criticism, an interview, the introduction or strangers, giving mechanical and geographical directions, and so on. Each students is asked to review the aforementioned principles, to investigate his topic, and to present a short speech to the class about it. He then leads the class in a discussion and question-answer period regarding his topic. I grade him on both his three-four minute speech and his ability to lead the class in the short discussion period which follows.

Conclusion

Certainly this list of concepts, learnings, and their brief descriptions is incomplete. Moreover, the teaching and learning of them necessarily result in the consideration of other notions and skills not mentioned in this essay. Such is the nature of any unit. Nonetheless, my goal is to be able to say to myself that when the unit is completed, students not only have learned about interpersonal communication but also about themselves, their relationships with others, and how their relationships become what they are principally as a result of their ability to manifest their learnings of interpersonal concepts and principles.

FOOTNOTES

1. Lee Thayer, in preface to Communication Theory and Research: Proceedings of the First International Symposium, ed. Lee Thayer, (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1967), p. v.

2. Abraham Kaplan, "The Life of Dialogue," Communication: A Discussion at the Nobel Conference, (London/Amsterdam: The North-Holland Publishing Co., 1969), as reprinted in Wisconsin Speech Communication Association Journal, (3), No. 2, 1973, p. 58.

3. Bernard J. Cooke, S.J., Christian Sacraments and Christian Personality, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1968), p. 222.

4. Dean C. Barnlund, "Communication: The Context of Change," Perspectives on Communication, eds. Carl E. Larson and Frank E. X. Dance, (Milwaukee, WI: Speech Communication Center, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1968), p. 25.

5. Barnlund, p. 25.

6. Waldo Braden, "What Can Be Done by Teachers of Speech to Preserve Freedom of Speech: A Symposium," The Southern Speech Journal, (19), May, 1954, p. 335, as cited in James W. Parkerson, "Good Men Speaking Well: America's Urgent Need," Vital Speeches (34), No. 14, May 1, 1968, p. 444.

7. Frank E. X. Dance, "This Above All," Spectra (18), No. 11, December, 1982, p. 4.

8. "The Needs and Concerns of Youth and Families in Wauwatosa," a report by the Wauwatosa Youth Commission, (Wauwatosa, Wi, 1980).

9. Kaplan, p. 57.

10. William C. Schutz, FIRO: A Three Dimensional Theory of Interpersonal Behavior (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958).

11. Robert Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative (New York: Atheneum Publishing Co., 1966).

12. Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner Publishing Co., 1970).

13. Elizabeth A. Kyes and James D. Moe, "Some Muddy Reflections on Abraham Kaplan's 'The Life of Dialogue,'" Wisconsin Speech Communication Association Journal, (3), No. 2, 1973, pp. 63-68.